

Misperceptions of Jesus: #3

"Jesus: The Sign of Jonah"

Matt. 12:38-50

--CEFC 12/1/19;

12/3/00

Topic: Jesus; Communion

Politics is controversial.

Religion is controversial, too,

but often what makes religion controversial are its political connections.

That is as true today as it was 2000 years ago.

And the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth created a storm of controversy within Israel

particularly because of the political implications of what he said and did.

Those were tense times in Israel, not unlike Israel today.

Palestine was a tinderbox ready to flare up at any moment.

The Jews' Roman landlords were constantly threatening

to unleash the awesome power of their Legions

if the Jews did not keep the peace,

and pay their proper respect

and their proper taxes to the authorities.

There were a number of competing political opinions

about how the Jews ought to live as a people

under the rule of the Romans.

Of course, controversy among the Jews was nothing unusual--

I've heard rabbis today talk about this--

When you get three Jews in a room, they say,

on any given subject you can expect five different opinions.

And so it was in the first century--

Some like the **Sadducees**, an aristocratic, priestly party,

felt that cooperation was the best approach--

they collaborated wherever they could with the Roman authorities.

At the other extreme were the **Zealots**--

a radical party of Jews, similar, I suppose, to Hamas or the PLO,

convinced that only armed revolt, in the form of terror attacks,

was the proper response.

Another group, the **Essenes**, who left us the Dead Sea Scrolls,

thought that the whole bunch in Jerusalem,

including the Jewish priests themselves,

had gone to the devil,

and they withdrew to a monastery in the desert.

Theirs was what we call "the Benedict Option" today.

And then there were the **Pharisees**--

They were as concerned about the political future of Israel as any of them.

But their strategy was to encourage personal holiness

by a meticulous attention to the law--

especially in those areas that marked out the Jews from the Gentiles--
circumcision, Sabbath-observance, kosher food laws, and Temple worship.

These must be protected and kept at all costs.

All of these various Jewish groups were patriotic in their own way,
and each was intent on protecting their own turf against the others,
claiming the right to define the will of God for the nation.

**Each had their own answer to the political stance that ought to be taken
and what rightly constitutes the people of God.**

**And onto this stage, one Jesus of Nazareth makes his appearance
and takes his stand.**

Following that radical renegade named John the Baptist
who called Israel to repent and be baptized in the Jordan River,
Jesus traveled through the villages of Galilee
preaching a message of good news
and healing people of all sorts,
declaring that the kingdom of God
for which the people had waited so long
had now come near.

But many in Israel were unconvinced and even antagonistic
toward such an announcement.

Just who does this man think he is?

And what is this kingdom he is talking about?

Jesus seemed to be on some sort of campaign,
but what is his platform,
what is his political agenda?

In our passage from the Gospel of Matthew this morning,
Jesus claims for himself the right not only to set out the right path for Israel,
Jesus claims to define the people of God,
and in the process he demands our faith.

We'll see that as, first, he affirms his supreme place in the revelation of God;
then, in the way he shows the failure of the existing options,
and finally, in the designation of God's true family
as those who follow him.

Turn with me to Matt. 12:38.

Jesus didn't fit precisely into any of the pre-existing categories,
he had no party loyalty,
so he was liable to criticism from all sides.

The Gospels focus particularly on his run-ins with the Pharisees,
and last week we saw them attribute Jesus' healing power
to Beelzebub, the prince of demons.

In their view, Jesus was not just misguided;
he was evil.

In our passage this morning
they come at him again--some of them at least--

perhaps to give him one more chance.

They say in v. 38,

"Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you."

In other words,

give us some definitive proof that you really do speak for God.

Be like Moses who parted the Red Sea

and called down manna from heaven.

Be like Elijah who made a heavenly fire consume the sacrifice on the altar

at Mount Carmel.

Show us your stuff, Jesus,

so that we can know for sure, without a doubt,

that what you say is true.

Isn't this a reasonable request?

Jesus doesn't think so--

v. 39--**"He answered,**

"A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign!"

Why does he respond this way?

First, because Jesus knew their hearts—

this was no innocent inquiry coming from honest seekers.

Both Mark and Luke, in their accounts, declare that

these people posed this question to test Jesus.

Their minds were not open to the truth—

they had already decided what they thought of Jesus.

And second, Jesus responded this way because

God just doesn't operate in the way the Pharisees proposed.

These Pharisees were putting God in the dock,

and they were standing as his judges.

But he wouldn't be subject to their rules, and their judgment.

They had it backwards.

Those who come to God must first humble themselves.

They must be willing to receive what he offers--

he sets the terms of the relationship, not them.

This kind of demand came from unbelieving and hardened hearts,

minds closed to what God had already revealed in Jesus.

There would be no miracles-on-demand.

For what would be enough for them?

Would raising someone from the dead be enough?

In fact, when Jesus gave his friend Lazarus new life after four days in the grave,

it only provoked them further in their plots to take Jesus' life.

They wanted to kill Lazarus, too!

"A wicked and adulterous"—

that's the same expression the Lord God had used

to describe that generation of Israelites

whom he had led out of Egypt through the Red Sea

but who within days began to complain that had no bread

and longed to return to their slavery in Egypt.

"A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! " Jesus says.

"But none will be given it *except the sign of the prophet Jonah.*"

And what was that?

**"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish,
so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."**

Yes, there would be a sign—but not now; only later.

As Jonah entered into the realm of death, when swallowed by a great fish,
so Jesus, the Son of Man, would experience death itself,
and like Jonah he would be saved from it by the hand of God.

Jesus often spoke in cryptic language, almost like riddles,

here using a Semitic way of speaking that characterized
that period from Good Friday to Easter Sunday
as **"three days and nights."**

The sign of Jonah--

In John 2 Jesus gives a similar answer to a similar demand,
after throwing the money changers out of the temple
"What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?"
they asked.

**Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple,
and I will raise it again in three days"**(John 2:18,19).

Only later did his disciples realize that he was talking about his own body
that was raised on the third day.

That was the sign that *would* be given--

Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead.

But even that, like Jonah's experience,

would have to be received by faith on the testimony of others.

There's no getting around it--

you *will* not believe unless you are *willing* to believe.

God won't bow to *your* demands--

you must bow to *his*.

He has given us all the evidence we need;

now he demands our faith.

"Won't you recognize what is already here before your very eyes?" Jesus asks.

Consider this:

Pagans of the past,

Gentiles with no connection to Israel--

they responded to God's messengers.

What's wrong with you?

You are setting yourself up for the judgment of God.

v. 41 **"The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation**

and condemn it;

for they repented at the preaching of Jonah,

and now one greater than Jonah is here.

42 The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation

and condemn it;

for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom,

and now one greater than Solomon is here."

One greater than **Jonah** is here,

one greater than **Solomon** is here,

and back in v. 6--something greater than the **temple** itself is here--

In the past God had revealed himself through prophets, priests, and kings--

but now he has revealed himself through a **Son**.

Are you willing to believe what is now set before your very eyes?

Jesus is God's supreme revelation—

and he has given us all the evidence we need to recognize who he is.

He has lived a sinless life,

he has performed miraculous deeds,

he has risen from the grave.

What more could you want?

"This generation" of Jews, represented by these Pharisees,

was in a very dangerous position.

And Jesus uses a rather odd parable to illustrate

their failed attempts to make themselves right with God.

v. 43--"When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places

seeking rest and does not find it.

Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.'

When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied,

swept clean and put in order.

Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself,

and they go in and live there.

And the final condition of that man is worse than the first.

That is how it will be with this wicked generation."

This isn't about the intricacies of exorcism,

and how to avoid a relapse--the last line indicates otherwise.

This was meant to illustrate the national experience of the Jews of that generation.¹

Through various reformational and revolutionary movements

the Jews had sought to clean out their national "house"—

especially epitomized in the temple in the Jerusalem--

from the evil forces of the pagan world around them.

In the second century B.C. the Jewish Maccabean family had led a revolt

that resulted in the evacuation of the Greeks from Palestine,

The temple was cleansed of its desecration

in a ceremony that is still celebrated during the festival of Hanukkah.

But corruption quickly crept in again,

and the Pharisaic movement began,

again, seeking to purify the people.

And then there was the rebuilding of the temple itself by King Herod

which was nearing completion in Jesus' day.

All these were attempts to renew Israel by cleaning house in some way.

¹For this interpretation, see esp. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp.455f.

But Jesus said, all of these external remedies simply left the house empty again,
leaving Israel open to further, and even worse, internal trouble.

The demons that plagued her would return in force.

All of these efforts could do nothing to renew Israel from within.

Their hearts were left unchanged.

Nothing less than a new occupant in the house would do.

And what could that be?

It must be God himself--

The Lord must return to his house,

the Lord must resume his residence in Israel--

and in Jesus Christ he had come—Jesus was Immanuel—God with us—

he had come to cleanse his people from the power of the devil,

he would occupy their house,

but the Jewish religious leaders wanted no part of it.

And so their doom was sure.

These Pharisees, as I said, were deeply concerned for their nation.

They were zealous to protect Israel from the pagan influences

that they thought would destroy them as a people.

But Jesus claims that, in fact,

they were leading the people astray,

like false shepherds.

The true people of God, according to Jesus,

were not to be defined by their ethnic heritage, or by circumcision,
or by Sabbath-observance, or by keeping kosher.
What was most important was a relationship with God
which cleansed their sin and transformed their hearts.
And that relationship with God as their Father
was to be found through a relationship with Jesus as God's Son.
Nothing else will do.

Jesus would contend that God's true people was not a political entity at all.

This is what we find in the final paragraph of our passage--vv. 46-50.

**"While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside,
wanting to speak to him.**

**Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside,
wanting to speak to you."**

He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"

Pointing to his disciples, he said,

"Here are my mother and my brothers.

For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven

is my brother and sister and mother."

You have to appreciate what a radical notion this is.

In any peasant society,

where family relations provide the primary source of one's identity,

this was shocking--

and even more so in Jewish culture.

An Israelite was defined by his pedigree--

his tribe, his clan, his father.

But here Jesus is suggesting something quite different--

One's family--

one's central point of identity and the object of one's deepest loyalty--

that was to be found in relationship to him.

"Pointing *to his disciples*, he said,

"Here are my mother and my brothers."

And this isn't the only place Jesus says this--

**Matt. 10:35"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me;
anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;"²**

Allegiance to him was more important than allegiance to one's family.

When Jesus pointed to his disciples and said, "This is my true family,"

he really meant it.

Make no mistake--

this kind of statement was deeply subversive

at a personal, social, cultural, religious, and political level.

It undercut the very foundation of what it meant to be a Jew.

But there's something else Jesus says here that is just as important--

He claims here that his disciples, those who follow him,

²cf. Mt 8:21; 19:29; 10:34,35; Luke 14:26 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters --yes, even his own life --he cannot be my disciple. 27 And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

are those "who do the will of his Father in heaven."

That is, he is the one who now defines the true people of God--

not the Pharisees, or the Sadducees, or the Zealots or the Essenes--

it is not the teachers of the law--

but he himself is now defining God's true family.

It is his disciples, his followers, those who come to him in faith--

they are the one who "do the will of his Father in heaven."

And those who join in following him

become members of a new community,

which elsewhere he calls his church.

This is a new family--

brothers and sisters living under the rule of God in his kingdom,

and experiencing the love of God as their Father.

Are you a part of that family?

In our passage Jesus addressed that first-century Jewish generation in three areas--

seeking signs,

cleaning house,

and determining the family.

And in all three, Jesus was declaring his right to define the people of God,

and in the process, he demands our faith in him.

And that generation in Israel, by and large, did not heed his word—

they did not receive Jesus for who he was.

As a consequence, Jesus said,

they would face certain judgment.

And they did—

within forty years, that generation was annihilated by the Romans

when they destroyed Jerusalem, leveling the temple,

in the Jewish War of AD 70.

Now Jesus addresses this generation--our generation.

Jesus now defines who are a part of God's people,

and he demands our faith.

How will you respond, here, today?

Let me point to three applications, all of which relate to this table before us.

1) First, with regard to seeking signs,

Don't ask for a sign from God

when you won't receive what God has already revealed (vv. 38-42).

Sure, there are times when we have our doubts.

Questions come up in our minds--we want certainty.

We crave definitive proof.

If only God would show himself to me?

If only I could have a sign that he's really there,

a sign that he really cares? I know that feeling.

But I ask you, What do you want him to do?

To shake the building?

To create some mysterious image on the wall?

To communicate in an audible voice?

What would it take?

But, you see, he has already given us a sign.

Just look before you, at the bread and cup--

this is God's sign—and this is all the sign we need.

The bread and the cup signify to the us

that certain and unfailing love of God for us

through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus his Son.

"This is my body; this is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me."

Commune with me at this table, until I come again in glory.

Jesus Christ is God's supreme revelation,

and he is no more clearly revealed than here at this table.

Receive this sign by faith,

and ask the Spirit of God to confirm its truth in your heart today.

2) Second, with regard to cleaning house,

Don't think that mere moral reform

can address your real spiritual need (vv. 43-45).

You can amend your ways,

you can turn over a new leaf,

you can get the latest self-help books,
and try harder to be the kind of person you want to be.

You can get more involved in the church,
and even immerse yourself in Bible studies and accountability groups.

But all that sweeping out of the old will do you no good
if there is nothing new to replace it.

Seven more demons worse than the first
will be waiting for their chance to invade.

How easy it is to become proud of your own piety!

All this self-help religion is like trying to stop thinking about "pink elephants."

You can try all you want,
but you **can't** do it,
as long as all you're trying to do
is not think about pink elephants.

You have to have something else more powerful fill your mind
to take away that image of pink elephants!

Your house needs a new occupant.

You need Jesus Christ to dwell within you by his Spirit.

You need him to change your heart from the inside.

All the rest is mere whitewash.

That's why Jesus said to Nicodemus the teacher of Israel, "**You must be born again.**"

Nothing less will do.

And that too is signified to us here--

when we eat the bread and drink the cup
we are signifying that internal work of Christ in our lives.
Jesus Christ comes to live within us by the Spirit.
And living the Christian life is all about letting Christ live through you.

Gal. 2:20--"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live,
but Christ lives in me.

The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God,
who loved me and gave himself for me."

This is the promise of the New Covenant--

the law not given to us from the outside,
but the law written on our hearts.

Christian growth in godliness is not just a negative exercise—
a putting off of all that is repulsive to God;

Christian growth in godliness involves a positive transformation—
a putting on of Jesus Christ in all his goodness, truth, and beauty.
It is about letting a love for Christ crowd out everything else.

So come to this table,
and feed on Christ in your hearts by faith.

3) And third, with regard to determining the family,
recognize that **God's true family is now centered on Jesus (vv. 46-50).**

And if you have become a follower of Jesus Christ--
if you have seen your need of his grace and forgiveness,
if you have recognized that Jesus died for your sin
and was raised so that you could have new life;
if it is your desire to do the will of his Father
as he empowers you,
then you belong to a new community,
a new family.

That's what baptism is about, isn't—
it is a visible sign of a spiritual reality—
being united to Christ
and being welcomed into his visible family of the church.

That, too, is signified as we come to this table--
for we come here together.
This isn't something you do in the privacy of your own home--
it is a corporate act of the church family.
It is our church's "family meal"
as we gather around the family table—the **Lord's** table.

So as the bread and the cup are passed,
don't receive them if you aren't a part of this new family,
this new community which is the church of Jesus Christ,
signified by your baptism and the public profession of your faith.

For that's what this means--
we are brothers and sisters together before God our Father,

seeking to do his will through Jesus Christ.

I remember when I first came to realize this truth when I was in college.

At the time I was being recruited by a fraternity.

Now, I have nothing against fraternities, (though they do have their downside)

but I remember how difficult it would be for me

to refer to those other members of the fraternity as my "brothers."

No, you are my brothers and sister--here in the church.

We are a new family—a part of the family of God--

what unites us by the Spirit in the body of Christ by the shedding of his blood

is more significant than the mere human blood

that unites us with our earthly family.

Let that reality sink in.

Let it challenge your own commitment to this family,

as an expression of your commitment to Jesus himself.

Jesus himself now defines the family of God

and he demands our faith.

Come to the table,

and receive these signs

and receive Jesus Christ in faith this morning.

Prayer as our servers come forward—

Dec. 1, 2019

**"Misperceptions of Jesus, #3--
Jesus: The Sign of Jonah"
Matt. 12:38-50**

Who was this man, and what did he mean for Israel? This was the question on the minds of the Jewish leaders as they faced Jesus. But he knew that their minds were already made up. His response to their request for a sign prompts him to address their problem and to provide his answer. **Jesus himself now claims the right to define the family of God, and he demands our faith.**

I. Seeking Signs:

**Don't ask for a sign from God
when you won't receive
what God has already revealed (vv. 38-42),**

***Jesus is God's supreme revelation—
What more could you want?***

II. Cleaning House:

**Don't think that mere moral reform
can address your real spiritual need (vv. 43-45)**

Your house needs a new occupant.

III. *Determining the Family:*

God's true family is now centered on Jesus (vv. 46-50)

*As a disciple of Jesus
you belong to a new community.*

Sermon Response:

**"Misperceptions of Jesus--
Jesus: The Sign of Jonah"
Matt. 12:38-50**

- What is the attitude of Jesus toward those who ask for signs? Do you ask for signs from God? Why? Are there any circumstances in which it may be appropriate? (cf. Gideon in Judges 6:36-40. How was Gideon's attitude different from that of the Pharisees?)
- Read Mt. 11:16-19; 17:17; 23:29-39; 24:34. Jesus pronounces words of judgment upon "this generation"--why? What was their central sin? When did their judgment take place? What lesson can we learn from their condemnation?
- Read vv. 43-45. What was wrong with what "this generation" had done? How can that faulty process be true of us?
- Read vv. 46-50; then consider Mt. 10:34-38; 8:22,23; 19:29; Luke 14:26,27. What does this say about the high value placed on family relationships today? Can we be guilty of "familial idolatry"?
- In the light of vv. 49-50, what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? How ought this passage to affect the way we view others within the church? What can you do today to put this truth into practice?

•Take time to pray—In your prayer, reflect on the place of Jesus as the supreme revelation of God. Pray for eyes to see him in all his glory. Pray that he may dwell in our hearts, driving out all that does not belong there. Pray that we may cherish our new family—our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.